

# Cecilia Manguerra Bainard's Oriental Oriental "Magdalena": A Linguistic Reinvention

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**Abstract---** Critical at this point in the postmodern society is 'an idea' nuanced in myriad voices. This paper contends that in the Philippine context there may be very little room for this type of linguistic exploration but is enough to exhibit the existing engagement of writers with the never-ending phenomenon of interpretation, that is, a particular meaning is contingent to one's "situational frame". Simply put, two similar structures/codes/words are associated with multiple meanings. More so, these modes of interpretation will eventually affect one's capacity to assign an array of codes to build upon the very image one intends to create. In this paper Magdalena in Cecilia Manguerra-Brainard's *Magdalena* is thought to be the embodiment of the Biblical Magdalena sought to be determined by linguistic limitations in the context of the author herself. *She* is exactly the very image of a woman that the author, in her capacity, would wish to create given her own situational frame---her milieu. Likewise, as the reader engages himself with the text, another frame is recreated so that the meaning becomes ultimately unstable in a continuous regression. Meaning-making incidence is primordially seen in this study as the crux of the matter by which different 'situational frames' can be understood as such. The character, Magdalena, is seen in that respect as it largely depends on how such relations are created between the signifier and the signified. Dwelling much on Saussure's perspective, the meaning that is evidently explored which gives Magdalena 'the identity' is not only drawn from the characteristics nor from her inner sensibility as a person but from the intricate connections that surround the perceived object of woman through which binary oppositions are thought to emerge.

**Keywords--** *simulacra, Eastern situational frame, hyperreality, simeosis, synchronic, diachronic*

## I. LINGUISTIC PHENOMENON VIS-À-VIS PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN

Women are plunged into several controversies if not catastrophic embodiments of the stereotype much adhered to in the past up to this millennia. Much of these are tolerated rather than given adequate scrutiny to discover whatever seems to be unsettled in the varying situations where they operate with less vitality. While it is true that many people no longer subscribe to this ancient perception the actual exercise of power in this phenomenon remains to be juggling at loose ends.

The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face. On the contrary the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic **flux** of impressions which have to be organized in **our** minds. This means, largely, by the linguistic system in our minds. [Whorf 1956 (1940):212ff]

Sapir and Whorf (named after Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf) ignites the concept regarding language preceding the thought. The logic presented being contrary to what is commonly held displaces the pre-eminence of thought. With language at the fore of any succeeding processes, it only implies that one's judgment is clouded by what lexicons are available and how these structures come to play with respect to the cultural backdrop. Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, doubtless, is pushing the belief that language basically determines how a certain society values and shapes all modes of thought.

What can be said here as the flux of terminologies to give woman her identity is what really governs the society's behavior in treating her as such. In an effort to give substance to this seemingly uncharacteristic tendency of a certain culture, a perspective from one of the linguistic scholars, John Lucy, sheds light on the growing issue whether or not language is dependent on its 'functional configuration' (1996,52). As for him, there exists a diversity of how language is utilized in a certain community. Considering the vast language habits in these different contexts there lies a strong belief that discourses among speakers affect the way they process information and eventually give birth to some responses that circulate in particular social space.

When cognitive activities are distributed across social space, the language or languages used by task performers to communicate are almost certain to serve as structuring resources, and the structure of language will affect the cognitive properties of the group even if they do not affect the cognitive properties of individuals in the group. (Hutchins 1995, p232)

Cognition breeds concepts that derive their meanings from other concepts. Each meaning changes as a result of its transfer from one temporal, cultural or linguistic context to another. Alazraki (21) clearly delineates the transformations of a protagonist [...] speak of "changes in meaning that occur to

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words, concepts....”These changes correspond to “infinite regress” which Spivakovsky explains to have implied an “interdependence of the meanings of different entities, and thus their collective subjectivity”.

Narratives that usually involve women as subjects fall under Bucholtz’s(3) observation having to do with the “uneasy relationship between language and feminist theory.” Indeed women have always been invaded by the spotlight. Their comings and goings remain the endearing aspects of their existence so that the world finds itself either glorifying or frowning upon any quality associated with them. In the Philippines women continue to confine themselves within norms and traditions which make them highly exposed to changing paradigms of the linguistic phenomenon on account that traditions are basically built on existing codes or signifiers.

These signifiers can not only be limited to that which signifies woman as ‘woman’ but extends to those lexicons that characterize her as a woman (specifically contextualized in this study as ‘oriental’).

Generally, women suffer from the relativity of language that accounts for its versatility and ever-evolving nature which cultures in different generations succumb to. The reality that is seen here is clearly elaborated further:

Language is an archaeological vehicle, full of the remnants of the dead and living pasts, lost and buried civilizations and technologies. The language we speak is a whole palimpsest of human effort and history.

(Russel Hoban in an interview, qtd. in Zuckermann 282)

In man’s effort to dissociate himself from this moving trajectory, he further stabilizes the connection between what he does and the thing created---language---which results in a cycle that inevitably entangles every human being that uses it. For the time being this situation continues to accumulate as many associations as possible without which language can never become what it is. Again, these ideas or concepts that support the value of women elucidates the ‘dialogic’ existence of language as what the Russian semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin[6] declares in *The Dialogic Imagination* where he contends that a ‘living dialogue’ is that which largely depends on the past and the future. Simply put, one can never entirely understand ‘slave’ if it had not occurred in relation to the events before and if it would not be understood in terms of its propensity.

Bucholtz in a more contextualized presentation explains that words used to describe women are natural products of time.

Being “good” is not a natural attribute but one constructed through the interplay of language and social expectation (9).

Giving weight to the collaboration of people in a given society, words appear as they are bound to occur without discounting the consequences they bring. The rippling effect that creates these changes, at one point, leads to this form of a certain deliberate subjection of women that dates back to the Biblical times when men decisively puts the adulteress to shame, let alone Jesus Christ who rescues her from the imminent peril that would absolutely cost her life. This incident in the Bible reverberates the message of hope involving women which seems to coincide with the principle that:

As women change the shape of cultural discourse, the contours of intellectual discourse are changing as well (10).

In Cecilia Manguerra-Brainard’s novel, the language proves Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism in the narrative’s portrayal of women whose descriptions are the results of the author’s perceptions founded on the experiences from years passed. This element of narrativity allows her to uncover the intricate events that connect three powerful women in this war novel such that it can be observed the display of prowess in wielding language of independence and controversy in different milieus. The varying tones and degrees of their experiences are all weaved into a distinctive fabric that redefines woman such that from the biblical archetype it proceeds to have taken the role of a character accessorized by the whims of another civilization.

In the light of the above creativity, the credit goes to the processural nature of simeosis which Parmentier (27) succinctly believes to have implied:

an inherent asymmetry in what can be termed the level of simeosis between the vector of determination and the vector of representation.

The concept highlights the capability of the ‘representamen’ to correspond to the object (original) in many ways. This opens doors for innovations thus obliterating the concept of mere replication which is only confined to the known characteristics of a certain thing that serve as pattern. Apropos the necessary alterations of perceptions which bring out this principle of asymmetry, Baudrillard (6) asserts that such practice lends stability to the concept called “hyperreality” which by definition is brought about by infinite regress, that being mainly characterized by a lack of fixed point of reference.

Baudrillard (qtd. in Cole 1) banks on reality as but a “concept” sustained by the continuous flow of rationality to support Heidegger’s claim (qtd. in Arfken 34) on the “multiple interpretations” as inevitable being the fundamental condition of human existence. Thus, the simulacrum has all the characteristics that one assigns to it by virtue of his own perceptions, interpretations and logical processes. Cecilia’s

attempt in her narrative can be understood as coming from her own navigation of social reality. In every human being, lies the capacity to imagine and each imagination presupposes signs, and signs raise issues of meaning. This, as Hoffmann (16) reiterates, is the means of attaining liberation from oppressive traditions and ideologies that keep the mind captive for a long time. Linguistic relativity not only becomes the means to acquiring the desire to be free but is in itself the best way out. Reinventing being tantamount to innovating makes a vivid representation of how language operates on a personal level.

With reference to Whorf's perspective, two principles are summarized as:

I. Structural differences between language systems will, in general, be paralleled by nonlinguistic cognitive differences, of an unspecified sort, in the native speakers of the two languages.

II. The structure of anyone's native language strongly influences or fully determines the world-view he will acquire as he learns the language." [Brown 1976:128]

Once the quality of conception, that is, language becomes determined in a specific context, every aspect of thought will have come full circle. It maybe the roughness of one's native language or its polished state (at a time when it is fully established) that shifts the present dilemma of how an individual perceives the world.

The arbitrary condition that surrounds the speaker-receiver or agent-patient transaction depends on several factors included in the set of beliefs, practices, and traditions. Analyzing the narrative demands a semi-objective approach which can be fulfilled through the lens of New Historicism. Linguistic structures are treated with respect to outside elements that may largely influence the meaning of the text itself. It is not ultimately the text that interprets itself as opposed to formalism. And since the text is the product of a particular culture, then in itself is the set of distinct ideologies.

In the process the plurality of simulacrum establishes different waves of transcendence with which particular characters gain and regain decisive roles. In the grand scheme of life, language is the gateway through which literature can be perceived as either the inimical or innocuous incarnation of codes which Guerin et al. (106) believes to have an integral purpose of engaging the world of value outside the text as the "signified" becomes constantly seen not at the periphery but within and outside of the text. Heitkemper-Yates (172) assessment in his *Toward a Semiotics of Fiction* about the "signified" shows that as it becomes destabilized in the magnification of the "signifier", the agency of the narrator is also expanded. As he takes into himself more responsibilities, the more that his engagement within the text affects the outcome of the entire narrativity.

## II. VULNERABILITY OF SYMBOL

The permanence and reiteration of some symbols in narratives, to some extent, explain their very importance. Magdalena as a famous archetype in literature is carefully chosen by Brainard in order to replicate the kind of woman who primarily gives life to the story. Despite being told in the perspective of Juana, Magdalena's daughter, the novel still capitalizes on the character, Magdalena. At the outset, Juana's descriptions prove critically influential to how any reader would wish to go about his own exploration of it :

"She was the faded photograph of a cautious-looking woman with a wistful smile, good-looking, yes, but with a strain around her eyes and lips. She was the bundle of letters, photographs, and journals that my grandmother kept at the bottom of her armoire. She was the bits and fragments of words and paper and cellulose---ethereal, a ghost I could not pin down."

The seemingly poetic narrative serves as a powerful mechanism for certain images to be illustrated as they provide substance and contextualization to the memory of another character. Being so detailed, it has gotten into the level of explaining the emotions of the narrator which implies longing for an elusive figure yet to be encountered. Not only does her character haunt Juana but also does more of an impact to the readers as Brainard continues to enliven her character with more associations such as those "men" involved with her in episodes of passionate encounter .

"He made her feel important, special, beautiful. In a way, his desire for her made her feel powerful. During supper at her parent's home, he slipped his hand under her skirt and touched her, making her bite her lower lip and blush."

Her detailed descriptions of lovemaking constantly reassures readers that men in Mary Magdalene's milieu are intelligently used as models , though not in its entirety, for they have been involved not for sexual pleasures only but for something that gives premium to a woman's value. However, the downside that men would always turn women's bodies into a "plaything" (Brainard 27) being replicated in the narrative serves a compelling purpose , that is, for women to discredit the idea of becoming willing victims (even in the context of marriage) :

"She touched her breasts, her stomach, her neck, her thighs, the back of her legs, the area between her legs. One day soon, this body will be old; and not too long afterwards, it will turn into dust. This thought frightened her, made her think how insignificant she was , made her realize that she alone gave her life significance."

Her redemption, as exemplified, rests on her own making as opposed to that of the Biblical figure who was mercifully pardoned by Jesus (John 8:4-11). Here, the disparity between philosophies is a clear indication of what Baudrillard calls “simulacrum” with a complete set of ideals. The existential leanings of Ferdinand de Saussure’s *signifier-signified relationship* assumption further affirms the inherent relativity of language, being subsumed in New Historicism, as in the case of Brainard’s method of emancipation.

This route, indeed, proves to be gripping as Magdalena embarks on another quest of surviving her past issues with her husband. Freedom, the way it is defined in the narrative is the experience of happiness, not to mention physical satisfaction, that regenerates her identity of being a woman. Brainard continues to assert that in a highly patriarchal society women have to be treated fairly even when that means abandoning the social contract of marriage:

“She thought that she could go to him one night in the dark when the servants were asleep. No one would know as she slipped into the cabaña, into his room, and lay on the bed beside him. Then maybe she could get even with Victor --- an act of infidelity against a thousand (27-28).”

This determination commences with layers of attraction from both sides. Magdalena being the representation of the *oriental woman* seeks for her own deliverance but in the least expected manner. She ventures into an undertaking that defies conventions as the author “in her own context” perceives it to be “an act of infidelity”. One can easily follow her logic that since the husband (Victor) did it first then an act of retaliation is expected of the wife. This results in the new definition of freedom which is neither absolute nor limited.

As the remake of Magdalena appears to be more liberal than the traditional archetype (who, in the Bible, is no longer found to be committing adultery), the greater does one’s confusion become considering her *oriental* lifestyle which preempts a conservative manner (a label attached to many Filipino women). Hoffman (123) believes that the more one’s view of the world is deconstructed by the actual composition of the narrative, the more the remarkable simulacrum comes to the fore. Since Ulmer (852) considers every reader “the perceiver” then the text’s meaning is many times deconstructed. Assuming that the author herself perceived the biblical Magdalena from the Bible then there could be no doubt that she also did the process in her own situational frame being “the perceiver” before becoming “the producer” of the text. This is necessary as Bickel (302) thinks that “one must satirize the use of language to imitate the world.”

What characterizes this oriental woman is found in the dominance of emotions each word or structure offers the reader. An array of implications can always be treated constant and prevalent so as, as Lydenberg claims, the indeterminacy of the precise meaning of the word (112). The meanings at multiple angles of interpretation become apparent at each attempt of understanding the travails of the character based on any lens.

### III. ORIENTAL SIMULACRUM THROUGH STYLE

Lockard (1) emphasizes that the assessment of style can help to place postmodern literature, culture and individuals within a proper and perceivable historical context. In *Magdalena*, one contemplates on the writer’s style that reflect this distinctive quality of being and which, according to DiYanni (61), conveys his unique ways of seeing the world. Sapir-Whorf hypothesis espouses a great deal of this principle. Cultural relativity contributes to this aforesaid lack of fixed point of reference.

The narrative evokes a sense of oriental vivacity which makes readers imagine beyond the details provided in the novel. A great deal of descriptions immerses one into understanding the oriental climate of the text especially that she employs words that reflect the local color---ideas that validate the distinct landscape of Cebuano culture; ideas that penetrate the senses; and thoughts that harness one’s sensibility—all combined to create the perfect simulacrum of life in the Orient:

“The land was rocky but riddled with coconut trees, hibiscus, birds of paradise and a colorful profusion of tropical bushes. It curved around a cove with calm blue sea and sugary white sand.”

The sharp edges of the scenery along with warm elements like “tropical bushes and trees” complement the intent of the author to promote the value of taking risks and the beauty of enduring the consequences they may bring. Brainard maintains the gravity of sensibility in the text as she accommodates voices of three women that advocate for self-actualization---discovering one’s individuality in life’s proscenium. The voice of Magdalena portrays that sense of clarity:

“And once, when the moon was full and moonlight streamed into a window, I stood by the window so the rays fell on my breasts, the curve of my neck, my waist, my sex, and I knew I glowed like some moon goddess.”

Nothing is left aside so that one is transported to that particular moment in time. The only frigate that Emily Dickinson in “*There is no frigate like a book*” believes to have afforded frigality is the machinery of words “that takes people

lands away” ; hence, the enjoyment in the remaking of that history within another replica of that story.

The bits and pieces of events arranged one after another (like an anthology of short stories ) is such that it creates a space before one attacks the next. With its short title, there is emphasis on the main event that sends a riveting message to be linked to the previous account. At the onset, the voice of a woman echoes her questions about her true identity:

“Soon after I found out I was pregnant, I decided to write my mother’s story. I never actually knew her although all my life I’d heard about her.... But I knew early on that I wasn’t just my mother’s daughter, that someone else’s blood coursed through my veins. I could see it in my pale skin and the hazel sparks of my eyes....”

At the middle, there are revelations of their (Magdalena’s and Luisa’s) present lives and disturbing pasts that involve men who changed the perspectives of their beings. This condition of human existence runs consistent with the evolving linguistic structures:

“With the darkening sky above them, they walked back home, clambering up the rocks, walking on the narrow rough trail, and feeling perfect happiness.”

Vague as it may seem, “happiness” could mean anything. In the author’s situational frame, it is the kind of happiness that resides in the most oblivious corners of time as this can only be felt by the two of them who are physically and existentially together. While to another “perceiver”, it could go beyond the mere feeling of joy depending on how the word is used to be loaded with meaning in his own situational frame. This style eventually becomes richly enhanced in the mind of the reader as the word in the statement offers varying shades of meaning.

Toward the end, Brainard chooses to further her case with justifications of certain issues involving women. Her choice of ending the narrative in a way that one can least suspect parallels that with the new context (liberal) that she designs for her characters to operate upon. With an unpredictable ending, one is led to asking the intent of the author in not revealing the key to Juana’s father’s happiness:

“For a moment I was tempted to confess to him that Magdalena was his daughter, but there was too much ground to cover, too many lives that would be upturned; and so I remained quiet, as I had these past twenty-seven years.”

The implications of her language at the end are clearly manifestations of an erudite writer who creates room for her readers to appropriately end it the way they ought to. A monologue at the end is a sign that before one returns the novel back to the shelf, at least, he is given access to the mind of one of the characters. No third-person “objective” narrator can

influence any judgment one has for the novel in that everyone is free to interpret whatever he thinks about with respect to his experiences, beliefs and culture.

Likewise, select images embellish the whole text as if in a nutshell everything can be thoroughly explained (but will still depend on how each one views them). The novel with its unique plot encourages readers to go back and forth as flashbacks become so frequent that no present event is independent at all. Ironically, whichever chapter one begins to read there is that element of isolation that enables a particular chapter to stand on its own. This ultimately characterizes Brainard’s style of offering cross-sections of life to examine its complexity. This technique manifests the case of language which can be set apart from the rest, yet still prominent in its own dimension.

Brainard exhibits the unique craftsmanship that endows the text’s musicality inherent in poetry. The style can be hinted at the very basic interposing of words whose meanings reside beyond the literal level and whose sounds create rhythm beyond the monotony of daily discourse. Such lines are testaments of her ingenuity:

“She was bits and fragments of words and paper and cellulose---ethereal, a ghost ....”

“The sea beyond had settled into gentle lapping ... and ribbons of gray smoke trickled ....”

“She feared the sensation of losing touch with reality, of disappearing into the heavens, of being one with Victor.”

“...was another stroke in the debit side of Fermin’s balance sheet in her heart.”

“He tastes of the sea this man. He is like a god risen from the sea.”

Figurative language such as consonance, personification, hyperbole, zeugma and simile enhances the way words are grouped together. There is more to each arrangement than meets the eye because the dynamism of meanings spring from it and myriad interpretations emanate from its vibrant texture. On the surface glare the words that constitute a story after another story whose plots are governed by the point of views of the first-person and third-person narrators:

First person---“When I felt life within me, I felt it was time to turn their secrets into stories.”

“My grandmother lived to see me married---happily, I might add.”

and

Third Person---“Luisa, invited Magdalena to lunch and spelled out some new details about Victor: he had a mistress; in fact they lived together in Mandawe....”

One voice in the prologue and epilogue sets the tone of indecision and decision. In between is another voice of an observer who apparently wants to enlighten “the perceivers” about the issues that build on one after another. This observer prevails in all of the chapters except in two accounts which means that the author succumbs to the objective retelling of events rather than what one participant might just feel throughout the time frame. Yet the fact that it is not a purely objective fictional construct does imply that one perspective is not enough.

This, too, is an indication of the lack of the fixed point of reference which gives way to the innovative reinvention of a context that transcends the original. The representation of multiple points of view contributes to the phenomenon of ontological uncertainty for having capitalized on the irregular flow or the destruction of the complacent perspective of order. Predictable outcomes become a less likely occurrence once plot structure is disintegrated so that there arrives a “plotless” presentation of existential time. Erickson (103) purports that one dimension of this experience of time is “existential time”. It is ingredient both in experiencing of time and in time as it is experienced. To explore time is to look at it prior to an instance which is impossible if one says ‘time began’ because it can never have a beginning.

Designing the whole novel like a set of stories (not even a series of short stories), time appears to be dislodged from a specific point. The indispensability of the idea that time is independent heralds the unconventional narrative that goes beyond reality. Brainard’s style is one of unusual indetermination of what comes next along with language structures’ inevitability to take new forms over time. The oriental attitudes take on the form of varying tones of structure that surround the concept of woman represented by Magdalena.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Magdalena is the product of the “unstable signified” that asserts authority over the simulacrum that it has created. The simulacrum in turn asserts the same linguistic characteristic that assumes more power than the predecessor. The quality governing its existence is highly dependent upon the “situational frame” of the author and eventually upon that of the reader’s, which Rimmon-Kenan (qtd. in Hoffmann 122) understands as a frame to “reduce indeterminacies” of the world by giving them “form”. Consequently, the more it reduces such the more that these propensities flourish to establish another taste, flavor, desire, behavior, and ultimate characteristics that define another creation propelled by the determination of language to innovate.

The reader (which includes the author herself being the first-hand reader) does not react passively to the narrative but activates his own potential to innovate the “form”. With more than just replication, “the perceiver” exercises and strengthens his exclusive or contextual treatment of a text. This gives him power to either give justice to certain issues in the text or condemn any element in it.

From the aforesaid perspectives on the functionality of language, Magdalena is most probably understood as belonging to the Biblical domain given the context that basically draws many of its practices from the Bible. The Philippines as a religious nation, therefore, creates different levels of conception. The union of interaction, context, performance, and culture conclude this understanding of language power (Duranti and Goodwin 1992).

Magdalena has been existing in millions of oriental discourses that foster clarity as to her real purpose in the society. The term “Magdalena” per se signals for ballistic targets directly to the minds of individual members of the group that now reflects the Filipino psyche---the prevailing thought towards Filipino women who despite being indecisive continues to take control of what is left in her possession. The oriental side elides the fear and lack of determination. Society then engulfs the new thought as language deems it to be as dramatic as possible when it comes to shaping the universal consciousness.

Wielding power also comes with symbol and style which in this study lend gravity to the effect the text intends to create. The relationship with which these two are drawn is explicated in a way that the development of the latter depends heavily on the dynamism of the former. Both are gleaned from the surface as chimeras that cast light on the ulterior direction of the text-- the “Magdalena” undergoes a transformation with respect to its new situational frames (the author’s and the reader’s).

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**Rhodora G. Magan, DALitcom**, has been a resident language, literature, and communications instructor at the Cebu Technological University-Cebu City Campus since 2010 and a lecturer in the Graduate School three years hence. Along with the responsibility to impart knowledge to students is her great interest in several local, national and paper presentations that build her the habit of accessing a repertoire of literary expressions and perspectives. From being a prolific researcher she takes on the identity of a writer. Despite the rising techniques in the postmodern era they never impede *The Cottage*, the entry submitted to an international body, to be appreciated as it bears exuberance of local color weaved in a significant way. Her determination to succeed in different fields is recently proven in her first authorship along with three others in the university. The publication of *New Literatures: New Texts, New Voices, New Perspectives* speaks of her dedication to educate learners on the thriving literary texts across timelines. Rhodora Magan is an educator, a researcher and a fictionist.